

United States Customhouse  
Northeast corner of Washington  
and Seneca Streets  
Buffalo  
Erie County  
New York

HABS No. NY-5609

HABS  
NY  
15-BUF  
10-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## UNITED STATES CUSTOMHOUSE

HABS  
NY,  
15-BUF,  
10-

Location: Northeast corner of Washington and Seneca Streets, Buffalo, Erie County, New York.

Present Owner: U. S. Government (at the time of the visit, 3/65).

Present Occupant: U. S. Public Health Services, Customhouse.

Present Use: Offices and warehouse, second floor vacant.

Statement of Significance: The existence of a U. S. Customhouse and two sub-stations in Buffalo indicated the importance of Buffalo as a port of entry. The building itself demonstrated the design characteristics and formulae of Ammi B. Young, architect for the Department of the Treasury. The building was demolished in 1965.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1855-56. The building was completed and occupied in October, 1856.
2. Architect: Ammi B. Young.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The site of the customhouse was comprised of several parcels. It was purchased May 12, 1855, for \$45,000. A map of the parcels dated May 25, 1849, is attached to the court case record on ownership of property to be acquired by the U. S. Government, Public Building Service Records, National Archives. In 1965, the building and site were sold to the Marine Trust Company of Western New York for \$51,000. The following property description is attached to this bill of sale.

"Beginning at a point in the northerly bounds of Seneca Street, at its intersection with the easterly line of Washington Street; running thence northerly at right angles to Seneca Street and along the easterly line of Washington Street 122.40 feet, more or less, to a point 36 feet southerly of the northerly line of inner Lot No. 177; thence easterly at right angles with Washington Street 140 feet, more or less, to a point 124 feet westerly of the westerly line of Ellicott Street

122.40 feet to a point in the northerly bounds of Seneca Street; thence westerly along the northerly bounds of Seneca Street 140 feet to the point of beginning."

4. Builder, contractor: Unknown.
5. Original plans: Published lithographs of the nine sheets of original drawings by Ammi B. Young are located in a bound volume, Plans of Public Buildings in Course of Construction, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Treasury, Including the Specifications Thereof, Washington, D. C., 1855.
6. Alterations and additions: In 1884-86, a four-story extension, measuring 127'-8" x 32'-6", was constructed along the 100-foot length of the Seneca Street facade. Charles Berrick was the superintendent of construction. M. E. Beebe of Buffalo was an architect and supervisor. Suppliers for construction were: furring, Wight Fire-proofing Co., Chicago; iron beams, Niagara Bridge Works; cut stone, William D. Collingwood, Buffalo; iron columns, etc., L. M. Morris, Pittsburgh; slate roof, Washington Slate Co., Slatington, Pa.; sheet copper, C. C. Hussey Co., Pittsburgh; iron roof, Pittsburgh Bridge Co.; iron partitions, furring, and lathing, Haugh Ketchum and Co., Indianapolis; plastering, David W. Lloyd, Pittsburgh; interior finishing, John O'Connor, Buffalo. There are available at the National Archives approximately 83 of a possible 101 sheets of blueprints, sepia prints, and original drawings of the various additions and alterations. In 1887, a hydraulic passenger elevator was installed by the Crane Elevator Company. In 1896, a contract was awarded to D. H. Hayes and Company of Chicago for construction of a one-story brick annex extending along the north side of the building, from the northeast corner about 62 feet and along the east side about 24 feet. This addition was completed and occupied in January, 1897. The cost of the two extensions was \$330,000. In 1911, alterations and improvements, including the installation of a new toilet room were completed by Vogt, Bergner and Company. The building was also refurnished.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

According to the original plans, the use of the building was as follows: basement, post office packing room, fuel and furnace room, post office washroom, toilets, and two stairwells; first floor, vestibule lined with boxes, enclosed work area with skylight, ladies' room, postmaster's room,

route agent's room; second floor, customhouse or general business room, six offices for collector, steamboat inspector, clerk of court, records and files of court, clerks, and a small auxiliary office, a center hall and two stairwells; third floor, a large court room with a semicircular niche for the judge, a grand jury and commissioner's room, district attorney's room, judge's library, judge's room and study, petit jury room, and the marshal's room. After the additions of 1886 and 1897, the postal service continued to use the first floor. The second floor was used by the custom and internal revenue officials. The third floor was used by the courts. The fourth floor or attic was used for storage of records.

In connection with the customs service in Buffalo, the government also owned two small wooden structures which were occupied by deputy collectors. The Ferry Street office, a two-story structure, 22 feet by 30 feet, was sited on land rented from the Auckinvole estate. It was located on the north side of Ferry Street near the bank of the Erie Canal, 300 feet from the Niagara River. This was the landing for the ferry between Fort Erie, Canada, and Buffalo. This building was constructed in 1875 at a cost of \$1,400, as per authorization from the Department of the Treasury, March 19, 1875. The other office, located at the side of the Grand Trunk Railroad depot near the approach to the international bridge, was built in 1872. The two-story structure was bounded on the west by Niagara Street and on the south by Porter Square.

In 1899, the supervisor of the census for the seventeenth district of New York was given office space in the building. The U. S. Circuit Court for Western New York occupied the third floor in 1900. After removal of most offices to the new post office in 1903 (see HABS No. NY-5605), the building was offered for sale. Between 1903 and 1909, no bids of \$125,000 were offered. Therefore the government decided to retain the building. The first floor and basement were used as a warehouse for U. S. Government stores. By 1930, a bonded warehouse was located in the basement, appraiser's stores on the first floor, Veteran's Bureau on the second floor, Department of Commerce on the third floor, and the Veteran's Bureau and U. S. Army recruiting office on the fourth floor.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society has a minimum of four photographs of the Customhouse in its Iconographic Collection. At least one of the photographs shows the exterior of the main facade before the 1884-86 addition.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Public Building Service Records, National Archives.  
Letters Received, 1854-.  
Letters Sent Chiefly by the Supervising Architect.  
Title papers, site register.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Minimum  
of eleven indexed references to newspaper articles.

Buffalo Historical Society Publication. XVI, 1912,  
p. 229.

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London: Oxford University Press, 1944.

A History of Public Buildings Under the Control of  
the Treasury Department. Washington, D.C.:  
Government Printing Office, 1901.

Overby, Osmund R. "Ammi B. Young in the Connecticut  
Valley." Journal of the Society of Architectural  
Historians, XIX (October, 1960), 119-23.

Plans of Public Buildings in Course of Construction  
for the United States of America Under the Direction  
of the Secretary of the Treasury. Washington,  
D.C., 1855.

Specifications for Building the Custom House, Buffalo,  
N.Y. Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, Public  
Printer, 1855.

U. S. Congress. Acts. August 4, 1854, April 5, 1856,  
March 3, 1857, August 7, 1882, March 3, 1883, March  
3, 1885, August 4, 1886, March 30, 1888, June 11,  
1896.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Bowman, A. H. "Report of the Engineer in Charge of the  
Office of Construction, under the Treasury Department."  
Report of the Secretary of the Treasury and the State  
of Finances for the Year ending June 30, 1855.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The original Italianate facade--covered with the addition of 1884-86--was a distinguishing feature of Ammi B. Young's work of the late 1850s. However, the new facade reflected the later mode of Renaissance Revival massing and organization as evidenced by McKim, Mead, and White's and Richard Morris Hunt's designs for the Union League Club competition of 1879.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair to good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This four-story rectangular structure on raised basement measured approximately 127 feet by 92 feet. It was seven bays across the front facade, including the corner pavilions.
2. Foundations: The foundations were stone.
3. Wall construction: The Ohio sandstone surfaces were highly dressed above the rusticated first floor.
4. Structural system: A system of wrought-iron columns was set on a floor constructed of brick or tile arches placed on wrought-iron beams. The columns of the first, second, and third floors had Corinthian capitals. The basement columns, according to lithographs of the original drawings, were of the Doric order.
5. Porches: All entrances were reached by stone steps due to the elevated level of the first floor.
6. Chimneys: On the original block, eight capped chimneys appear in a pre-1884 photograph. Two brick chimneys--each having an ornamental bracketed base with a bas-relief panel of a shield surrounded by olive branches--were placed, one at the extreme east projection and the other, the extreme west projection of the 1884-86 addition.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The recessed center entrance con-

tained arched double-leaf, wooden, paneled doors. The slightly projecting entrance composition consisted of paired rusticated Doric columns flanking the recess. Another set of paired columns flanked the narrow arched windows. The lower level of rustication, which included the column bases, was about six feet above the sidewalk level. A narrow, arched, recessed entrance was contained in the west end of the original block. A service door was located on the north side.

- b. Windows: All windows in the original block had arched, double-hung eight-over-eight-light sashes. First- and third-floor windows in the 1884-86 addition also had arched openings. Square-headed second-floor windows were fitted with projecting cornices. The third- and fourth-floor windows in the center south facade were treated as one unit. Windows in the two end pavilions had double-hung sashes. These recessed windows were grouped in threes. Arched basement windows of the original block were set below grade. The walls were protected by iron rails. Square-headed basement windows in the west end of the addition were also below grade. All basement windows to the south were above grade.

- 8. Roof: The hipped roof of the original block was covered with seamed metal and finished with a projecting molded cornice. The addition had slate-covered hipped roofs capping the pavilions, which were connected by a lower hipped roof. The projecting, denticulated cornice of the addition was capped by a parapet. Corner urns on the parapet marked the pavilions. Corrugated iron was used to finish the connection between the two roof levels.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plan: The extension of the customhouse in 1884-86, enlarged only the southern portion, or main public areas of the building, the postal service area, the custom service area, and the court chambers. These public areas fronted on Seneca Street. The offices were contained to the north of the east-west hallways of the second and third floors. The addition of the pavilions created more office space flanking the public areas. The structure contained 689,000 cubic feet.
- 2. Stairways: Two original stairways--one at the east and one at the west end of the building--ran from the basement

to the third floor. These stairways were composed of ornamental cast-iron elements--stringers, ends, risers, treads, railings, balusters, and newels. A small stairway located at the west end of the third-floor center hall gave access to the fourth floor.

3. Flooring: The first floor and all corridors had terrazzo floors. All other rooms had wooden floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings were painted plaster. Most offices had wooden wainscoting, about four-and-one-half feet high. The courtroom was finished with marble wainscoting, six-and-one-half feet high.
5. Doorways and doors: All woodwork of the addition repeated the molding design of the original block. All original doorways had molded arched frames with transoms. All doors were molded and paneled. Large double-leaf doors provided access to the courtrooms and other public spaces.
6. Special decorative features: The first floor, c. 1886, had oak woodwork with spindle-work grills and diagonal strip-filled panels framed with lamb's-tongue molding. Six stone fireplaces in the addition--in the postmaster's room, registered letter room, custom collector and inspector rooms, judge's chamber, and lighthouse inspector's room--were finished with a molded surround, quarter-engaged columns, and a bracketed mantel. The lintel, brackets, and supports were grooved. A square inset of a carved rondel marked the corners of the framed opening. A more decorative mantel was installed in the customhouse. The surround was topped by a border of rondels and flanked by applied pilasters with bracketed capitals. The third-floor courtroom had the most elaborate wall treatment. The heavily molded, bracketed, and denticulated cornice was attached to the wainscoting below by applied, paired pilasters supporting a segmental arch which was connected to the cornice brackets. The large, circular, pierced, cast-iron ceiling ventilator was originally surrounded by twenty-four gas burners. The elevator doors on the first and second floors had a semicircular transom filled with wire mesh. Wire mesh also filled the upper two panels of the doors. The third-floor doors had a slightly arched frame and three-panel doors. The upper panel was also filled with mesh. The square-headed doors of the fourth floor were similar to those on the third floor.
7. Heating: A steam boiler and two hot-water boilers were



used after the major extension. Repair to the heating and hoisting apparatus was made in 1899.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The customhouse faced south on a commercial street, which during the 1960s was part of the urban renewal area of downtown Buffalo.
2. Walks: Wide sidewalks continued around the building on the west and south.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade  
September 1973

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This photo-data book was prepared as part of a 1964-65 recording project in cooperation with the Buffalo-Western New York Chapter of AIA, Olaf William Shelgren (at that time Chairman of the Chapter's Preservation Committee), and Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.--both, of the firm Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec. Photographs were taken in May, 1965, by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, a further research and editorial project was undertaken in September, 1973, by Susan R. Slade, architectural historian.